

THE EIGHTIES IN REVIEW



Selections from the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art



EDWARD RUSCHA

Several Monograms, 1986

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December 8, 1989 – February 28, 1990

Whitney Museum of American Art, Fairfield County

The greatest strength of the Whitney Museum throughout its history has been its primary commitment to exhibit and collect the work of living American artists. This exhibition presents paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints, books, and photographs from the Permanent Collection that were created and acquired during the 1980s—a decade in which the activity of the art world intensified, as did its media visibility and power.

In New York, the early eighties saw the rise of the East Village as a place for showing new art; the later part of the decade saw the “fall” of the district, as many of the more successful galleries relocated to ever-expanding SoHo. During the 1980s, Los Angeles became an important center for contemporary art, its artists, museums, and galleries playing a major role in the international scene. Throughout the country, the number of art galleries devoted to showing contemporary art increased. Corporate collecting grew immensely, adding its weight to the already heated competition among private individuals for the newest art. Although the expanded audience for contemporary art has benefited museum exhibitions, the big money that has entered the art world in recent years has posed a serious threat to the life and function of these museums, for it has severely hampered their ability to acquire significant works. The new tax laws also make it less desirable for individuals to donate works of art to museums. Through the generous assistance, however, of trustees, committee members, patrons, and others, the Whitney Museum has succeeded in acquiring an important and stunning collection of high quality works representative of developments and concerns in the postmodern eighties.

The idea of the postmodern in the visual arts arose in the early 1970s in relation to architecture. By the early 1980s, it was being applied to the fine arts, in the belief that modernism had ended with the reductive, primary structures of the Minimalists in the mid-sixties. Modernism insisted on originality of style, purity of form, and form over content, whereas postmodernism was eclectic and impure, filled with references to thoughts, emotions, and things beyond itself. Freed of the pressure to invent new forms, artists found stylistic sources in previous art as well as in popular culture, individual works often offering a commingling of the high and low. The term “appropriation”

became almost ubiquitous in the 1980s; it refers to the widespread practice of quoting and otherwise confiscating earlier images. Autobiography and self-confession, political and social commentary, narrative and literary content all informed the new art. Against modernism’s optimistic belief in industrial and technological progress, postmodernism reflects disillusionment. The artists react with both irony and compassion to the grim realities our culture has been forced to face in the name of progress.

In the 1970s, the decade in which many of the characteristics of postmodernism first emerged, several of the major artistic tendencies—Conceptual Art, Earthworks, Body Art, among others—involved a move away from conventional modes of art-making to ephemeral or immaterial art forms that defied the traditional museum-gallery structure and the idea of art as commodity. Although this art, Conceptualism in particular, had a profound influence on the art of the next decade, the eighties witnessed a return to painting, sculpture, and drawing, as well as a new appreciation of photography as a vehicle for artistic expression. The art produced during the eighties was extremely diverse, yet a number of major trends and characteristics can be identified, among them the emergence of an expressive figurative art that took as its subject the human condition, the development of allusive forms of abstraction, and the use of language and symbols to critique the mass media and the state of contemporary culture.

In the early 1980s, Neo-Expressionism—figurative in character, subjective in expression, and maximalist in its attitude toward subject matter, meaning, and form—became an international phenomenon. Although the artists drew from a wide range of sources, many made use of a vigorous painting style that looked back to Abstract Expressionism. An example is Susan Rothenberg’s haunting, psychologically charged painting *Holding the Floor* (1985), in which a figure in a constricted posture with downcast eyes is isolated against a large field of subtly colored, but frenetic brushwork. The graffiti-inspired art of Jean-Michel Basquiat may also be related to this trend. Basquiat’s Day-Glo colors, crudely scribbled markings, and expressionist brushwork convey his experience of the life of the streets, as in *Hollywood Africans* (1983). A good deal of the figurative art produced during the decade shared Neo-Expressionism’s focus on the

human condition: David Salle's prints, where layered and juxtaposed images serve as a metaphor for the splintered nature of human consciousness; Viola Frey's over-life-size ceramic figures, based on her observations of human behavior; Cindy Sherman's photographs, in which she casts herself in a wide variety of roles in order to explore and expose female stereotypes; and Ellen Phelan's watercolors, with their childhood dolls intimating comfort, wonder, and terror. Meaning in these works is generally ambiguous, opening them up to a broad range of emotions and interpretations.

Much of the abstract work of the eighties was not truly abstract, but hovered on the border between abstraction and, if not representation, then some vaguely figurative or otherwise referential impulse. This work is also laden with emotional and iconographical significance. Joel Shapiro, in his untitled drawing of 1987, uses geometric forms—four rectangles—to suggest a human figure. More commonly, artists exploited the evocative potential of biomorphic and organic forms. The central image in Bill Jensen's 1985 drawing for the painting *Spoons & Straws II*, for example, can be variously read as a seashell, a plant form, or body parts, among other images. In his 1982 drawing *Visitation*, Bryan Hunt employs waterfall imagery to suggest human figures, the title implying that the work might be open to religious interpretation. In #8 from the series *9 Drawings* of 1988, Carroll Dunham uses a curving, arrow-headed form with multiple appendages, drawn in a manner reminiscent both of the Surrealists and cartoons, to produce a dynamic, sexually charged image. Terry Winters' vast painting *Good Government* of 1984 combines imagery of honeycomb structures, seed pods, and other forms that allude to the naturalist's world with the lush painterliness of Abstract Expressionism. Despite the artist's scientific pose and earth-tone palette, an emotional component enters the work through its evocation of nature's cycle—birth, growth, decay, death.

Other artists working in the 1980s focused on the mass media and popular culture, examining the meaning objects, images, and words assume through the influence of the media and its self-appointed role as mediator of experience. Barbara Kruger rephotographed and enlarged photographs taken from an old sign language manual found in the public library, superimposing on each of the found images a word

from the phrase "We will no longer be seen and not heard." The phrase, coupled with the sign language imagery and the source of her overall design in advertising, seems to comment on the frustrated nature of communication, on how words and images can be divorced from meaning. The feminist voice in Kruger's piece is sounded again in Edward Ruscha's drawing *Several Monograms* (1986). Superimposed on the silhouette of a woman in a gown are images of stitched monograms of the sort one finds on sheets and bathroom towels, as if to imply that it is by these labels, which both hold and deflect meaning, that the woman defines herself or is defined.

Despite its diversity of media, form, and intention, much of the art of the eighties communicates something about the nature of contemporary experience and culture. Whether figurative, abstracted, or conceptually oriented, this art has something to say about the joys, fears, concerns, and frustrations of late twentieth-century life.

RONI FEINSTEIN

Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth

PAINTINGS

Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988)

Hollywood Africans, 1983
Acrylic and mixed media on canvas,
84 x 84
Gift of Douglas S. Cramer 84.23

Mike Kelley (b. 1954)

More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid and *The Wages of Sin*, 1987
More Love Hours, stuffed fabric toys and afghans on canvas with dried corn, 90 x 119¼ x 5; *The Wages of Sin*, wax candles on wood and metal base: candles, 25 x 25¾ x 25¾; base, 27 x 18½ x 18½
Purchase 89.13a–e

Brice Marden (b. 1938)

Number One, 1983–84
Oil on canvas, 3 panels,
84 x 109 overall
Purchase, with funds from the Julia B. Engel Purchase Fund 85.2a–c

Susan Rothenberg (b. 1945)

Holding the Floor, 1985
Oil on canvas, 87 x 147⅙
Purchase, with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee 86.40

Terry Winters (b. 1949)

Good Government, 1984
Oil on linen, 101¼ x 136¼
Purchase, with funds from The Mnuchin Foundation and the Painting and Sculpture Committee 85.15

SCULPTURE

Richard Artschwager (b. 1923)

Organ of Cause and Effect III, 1986
Formica and latex paint on wood,
6 units, 129 x 61¾ x 18 overall
Purchase, with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee 87.6a–f

Scott Burton (b. 1939)

Pair of Two-Part Chairs, Obtuse Angle, 1984
Polished granite, 2 parts,
33 x 24 x 33 each
Purchase, with funds from the Lemberg Foundation, Inc. 84.32a–d

R.M. Fischer (b. 1947)

Desk Set, 1987–88
Aluminum, cast iron, steel, brass, and electric lights, 59⅞ x 48⅞ x 32⅞
Purchase, with funds from the Mrs. Percy Uris Purchase Fund 88.33

Viola Frey (b. 1933)

Me Man, 1983
Glazed ceramics, 9 units,
99 x 29¾ x 25 overall
Gift of William S. Bartman 86.39a–i

Nancy Graves (b. 1940)

Cantileve, 1985
Bronze with polychrome patina,
98 x 68 x 54
Purchase, with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee 85.39

John Newman (b. 1952)

Uprooted Symmetry (The Anchor), 1988
Aluminum with patina,
50⅞ x 60½ x 64
Purchase, with funds from the Louis and Bessie Adler Foundation, Inc., Seymour M. Klein, President, and the Mrs. Percy Uris Purchase Fund 88.32

Robert Therrien (b. 1947)

No Title, 1985
Tin on bronze, 34⅝ x 16½ diameter
Purchase, with funds from the Eli Broad Family Foundation 86.33

WORKS ON PAPER

Gregory Amenoff (b. 1948)

Thorax, 1987
Ink, graphite, oil paint stick, and pastel on paper, 48⅙ x 39⅙
Purchase, with funds from the Drawing Committee 87.26

William Beckman (b. 1942)

Della, 1983
Charcoal and pastel on paper,
83⅝ x 50⅝ sight
Purchase, with funds from the Wilfred P. and Rose J. Cohen Purchase Fund, the Neysa McMein Purchase Award, the Richard and Dorothy Rodgers Fund, and the Drawing Committee 84.18

George Condo (b. 1957)

Untitled, 1987
Acrylic, oil, paper, and graphite on paper, 61⅙ x 80⅙
Purchase, with funds from Mr. and Mrs. William A. Marsteller 88.18

Robert Cumming (b. 1943)

Black Shoe, 1987
Color monotype: sheet and image,
29½ x 38
Purchase, with funds from the Print Committee 88.23

Carroll Dunham (b. 1949)

#8, from the series *9 Drawings*, 1988
Graphite, wax crayon, and carbon on paper, 27⅙ x 41⅙
Purchase, with funds from the Drawing Committee in memory of Victor W. Ganz 89.2

Bryan Hunt (b. 1947)

Visitation, 1982

Crayon, graphite, and linseed oil on paper, $8\frac{1}{2} \times 34\frac{3}{8}$ sight
Purchase, with funds from the
Wilfred P. and Rose J. Cohen
Purchase Fund 87.42

Bill Jensen (b. 1945)

Study for *Spoons & Straws II*, 1983
Charcoal on paper, $23\frac{3}{4} \times 17\frac{7}{8}$
Purchase, with funds from the Vain
and Harry Fish Foundation, Inc.
85.58

Jasper Johns (b. 1930)

The Seasons, 1987

Four etchings, dimensions variable:
sheets, approximately $26\frac{1}{4} \times 19\frac{1}{4}$ each;
plates, approximately $19\frac{1}{4} \times 12\frac{1}{16}$ each
Purchase, with funds from the
friends of Victor W. Ganz in his
memory 88.10.1-4

Barbara Kruger (b. 1945)

*Untitled (We will no longer be seen
and not heard)*, 1985

Nine photolithographs with
serigraphy, $21\frac{1}{16} \times 21\frac{5}{16} \times 1\frac{1}{2}$
overall
Purchase, with funds from the
Print Committee 85.61.1-9

Tom Otterness (b. 1952)

Monument Study, 1986

Ink and graphite on paper,
 $19 \times 24\frac{3}{4}$
Purchase, with funds from the
Drawing Committee 88.47

Ellen Phelan (b. 1943)

Say It Isn't So, 1987

Watercolor with gouache on paper,
 $30\frac{1}{16} \times 43\frac{1}{4}$
Purchase, with funds from the
Drawing Committee 88.19a-b

Robert Rauschenberg (b. 1925)

Bellini #5, 1989

Color photogravure: sheet and
image, $58\frac{7}{8} \times 38\frac{5}{16}$
Purchase, in honor of Charles Simon,
with funds given by his friends from
Salomon Brothers on the occasion of
his 75th birthday 89.17

Edward Ruscha (b. 1937)

Several Monograms, 1986

Dry pigment and acrylic on paper,
 $59\frac{1}{16} \times 40\frac{1}{8}$
Purchase, with funds from the
Drawing Committee 87.55

David Salle (b. 1952)

Untitled, from the portfolio

The Raphael, 1986
Color aquatint and soft-ground
etching: sheet, $25\frac{1}{4} \times 31\frac{1}{4}$;
plate, $17\frac{5}{16} \times 23\frac{7}{8}$
Purchase, with funds from
Raymond J. Learsy and
Robert Sosnick 86.14.2

Untitled, from the portfolio

The Raphael, 1986
Color aquatint and soft-ground
etching: sheet, $25\frac{3}{16} \times 31\frac{1}{4}$;
plate, $18 \times 23\frac{7}{8}$
Purchase, with funds from
Raymond J. Learsy and
Robert Sosnick 86.14.3

Joel Shapiro (b. 1941)

Untitled, 1987

Charcoal and chalk on paper,
 $53\frac{1}{8} \times 42\frac{1}{16}$
Purchase, with funds from
Mrs. Nicholas Millhouse and the
Drawing Committee 88.21

Cindy Sherman (b. 1954)

Untitled #146, 1985

Color photograph, $71\frac{1}{16} \times 48\frac{1}{8}$
Purchase, with funds from Eli and
Edythe L. Broad 87.49

Frank Stella (b. 1936)

Talladega Three II, 1982

Color relief print on hand-colored
paper: sheet and image, 66×52
Gift of Judge Steven D. Robinson
85.55.2

BOOKS

Eric Fischl (b. 1948)

Annie, Gwen, Lilly, Pam and Tulip
by Jamaica Kincaid, 1986

Five color and four black-and-white
lithographs, bound, 20×15
Published by the Library Fellows
of the Whitney Museum of
American Art

Richard Tuttle (b. 1941)

Hiddenness by Mei-mei Berssenbrugge,
1987

Four hand-stamped prints, bound
accordion-style, 15×10
Published by the Library Fellows
of the Whitney Museum of
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